

Tragic pain

Felix Budelmann

About half-way through Sophocles' play, Philoctetes suddenly screams 'ah ah ah ah'. Things were going smoothly. Neoptolemus had just gained his trust and seemed close to taking Philoctetes with his bow to the ship, as instructed by Odysseus, but now this. A fateful encounter with a snake in the past had left Philoctetes' foot festering and still gives him periodic bouts of agony. Further screams and exclamations follow. Even death seems a release to him. Eventually, Philoctetes eventually collapses into sleep, first handing the bow to Neoptolemus for safe-keeping. Sophocles pulls out all the stops – fifty lines of intense pain.

Philoctetes isn't alone in his pain. Heracles in *Trachiniae* and *Hippolytus* also submit spectators to lengthy scenes of agony, as do other tragic heroes, if to a lesser degree. Over the centuries, these scenes have been much admired, but they aren't necessarily easy to take for us today. There is something awkward about drawn-out writhing, screaming, in some plays even singing, under pain. The scope for embarrassment is considerable.

Philoctetes: (screams) Ah, Ah, Ah, Ah.
Neoptolemus: What is it?
Phil: Oh nothing, just keep going my boy.
Neo: You're not in pain from your constant infection?
Phil: Not at all. In fact, I'm perfectly at ease.
(groans) Oh dear Gods
Neo: Why are you calling the Gods with such groans?
Phil: For their safety and grace. (screams) Ah, Ah, Ah, Ah.
Neo: What is wrong with you?
 Sophocles, *Philoctetes* 732–740

Immediacy and distance

The key to tragic pain is, I think, performance. On paper 'ah, ah, ah, ah' and 'iou, iou' have something rather ridiculous to them. On stage, though, Philoctetes' pain can become the highlight of the play – highly charged, highly emotional, and very physical.

As soon, though, as you think a little more about the intensity of tragic pain in performance you come up against a paradox. On the one hand, there is a sense of immediacy. Nothing, you might say, gets through to us across the centuries the same way as a scream of pain. The Greeks may have believed in different gods and may have lived in a different kind of society, but surely pain is pain. No art form, moreover, is as well placed for conveying this sense of immediacy. Spectators are confronted not with a description or an image but with a body in pain. How much more real can it get? This immediacy is a great relief in a play in which Odysseus' and Neoptolemus' increasingly impenetrable web of deception makes it impossible to know what's what. On the other hand, perhaps pain isn't pain, after all. We live in an age of sophisticated pain killers and anaesthetics, while all that Heracles' doctor in *Trachiniae* is able to do is ask people to be silent so that Heracles can sleep. The Greeks must have been used to more pain than we are in the UK today. There is also a subjective side to pain that may not be constant across the ages. Even more important, pain by its very nature prevents immedi-

acy: it's neither immediately accessible nor even immediately expressible. Your pain isn't my pain. A 'schoolgirl when she falls in love', Virginia Woolf remarked, 'has Shakespeare or Keats to speak her mind for her, but let a sufferer try to describe a pain in his head to a doctor and language at once runs dry.' I'm not sure just how many people borrow from Shakespeare to declare their love, but Woolf is right that communicating pain is one of the most difficult things. 'Doctor, it's a searing sort of pain; it comes and goes'. Pain is hard to express and hard to understand. Other people's pain is a closed book. No doubt Philoctetes is in pain, but do you know what his pain really feels like? His screams both draw us in, and shut us out.

This is, I think, where the formality of the scenes can be very powerful, 'ah ah ah ah' and all. The mask makes any facial display of emotions impossible. Similarly, the language remains both disciplined and highly poetic. On the other hand, you can hear Philoctetes suffer. Pain breaks the regular flow of the verse. Philoctetes struggles to find ever-new ways of expressing the pain, describing the disease as something external that 'goes through', 'puts a load on him' and 'comes from time to time, when it is weary of its wanderings'. Like modern patients, he looks for metaphors and explanations that do justice to what he goes through. Sophocles carefully keeps a balance between formality and immediacy. In a successful production, this balance can be an arresting way of bringing to life the paradox of Philoctetes' pain that is so close and yet so distant.

Isolation and exposure

Torture victims talk about pain taking over the self completely. The torturer destroys their will to resist and their sense that there is a world outside to which they belong. Torture makes its victims both lonely and exposed, taking away the comfort of both solidarity and privacy. Philoctetes isn't tortured, but he suffers a similarly devastating blend of loneliness and public display. When the disease first strikes, he tries to conceal it, worried that Neoptolemus will be so appalled by what he sees that he will desert him. But the pain won't go away, and Philoctetes now begs Neoptolemus to defend the bow against anybody trying to take advantage of his helplessness. At no stage is Philoctetes' misery as a cast-away on Lemnos as intense as during the attack of his illness. Unable to determine his own fate, he is completely at the mercy of others who come and go freely, looking at him, helping him and harming him at their choosing. Not even his cave is out of Odysseus' reach.

All this raises complex questions about that other group of onlookers: the spectators. How do we look at Philoctetes writhing in pain? How do we look at amnesty international ads showing torture victims? Is it pity? No doubt; certainly for Neoptolemus watching Philoctetes' agony is an important experience. Never before does he speak so clearly of pity as when he sees Philoctetes suffer. Empathy? Perhaps. It's impossible not to feel for him, or even with him. But as with other people's tooth-aches, there are limits. And it would be a mistake to think that pain makes people better. Heracles remains a truly impossible person, and so does to a lesser degree Philoctetes. Sado-masochism? Voyeurism? Is there any pleasure in watching pain? The amount of blood in cinema is hard to explain otherwise. These are difficult questions; questions in fact, I sometimes think, that become more difficult the more one thinks about them. They certainly are questions that go to the heart of how

tragedy works and what tragedy is about. Tragic pain is well worth thinking about.

There are two wonderful books on pain, in literature and elsewhere: D. B. Morris, *The culture of pain* (Berkeley 1991) and E. Scarry, *The body in pain: the making and unmaking of the world* (New York and Oxford 1985).

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